

From Allusion to Insight and Right Action:  
Political Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabî’s Hermeneutics of Spiritual Realisation <sup>1</sup>

*We shall continue to cause them to see Our Signs on the horizons  
and in their own souls until it becomes clear to them that He is the  
truly Real....*

(Qur’an 41:53)

The dramatic recent expansion of worldwide interest in Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings, which is reflected in—and simultaneously sustained by—a phenomenal increase in new editions, translations, and a wide range of partial studies and presentations of his writings, has also raised a fundamental problem of interpretation which often seems to have been overlooked by many scholarly specialists involved in this new wave of publications. As a teacher frequently working with non-specialist audiences in different languages and cultures, I am often faced with the dilemmas posed by the fact that most students of the Shaykh today (whatever their language or culture) naturally approach those studies without much informed understanding of those essential contexts—both historical and especially the ‘operative’ or existential ones—which are in fact needed for an adequate understanding and appreciation of his writings as they were meant to be read and utilised by his original audiences. For in the absence of that basic contextual background, such students are necessarily obliged to interpret whatever fragmentary studies of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings they do encounter either in terms of today’s very different prevailing religio-cultural categories and ideological frameworks or, in the case of more scholarly readers, in terms of whatever particular Islamic religious disciplines and received categories of thought they happen to take as their own unconscious personal framework for approaching Ibn ‘Arabî.

Such hermeneutical problems, of course, have always raised by the intentionally unique and intrinsically challenging, never-imitated nature of Ibn ‘Arabî’s own distinct rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> And they are beautifully illustrated in the familiar historical processes by which the more theoretical approaches to his work, throughout much of the Eastern Islamic world,

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<sup>1</sup> Prepared for colloquium ‘Le Symbolisme et l’herméneutique dans la pensée d’Ibn ‘Arabî’, Damascus, June 22-24, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> See the more detailed introduction to this dimension of the Shaykh’s work in our recent study of ‘Ibn ‘Arabî’s Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and “Translating” the *Meccan Illuminations*’, in *Journal of the Muhyiddîn Ibn ‘Arabî Society [JMIAS]*, vol. XXXIII (2003), pp. 54-99, and vol. XXXIV (2003), pp. 103-145.

became limited soon after his death to particular narrowly philosophical and theological perspectives focused almost exclusively on the detailed intellectual analysis of his *Fusûs al-Hikam*, in ways that have deeply shaped the wider public conceptions of the man and his writings down to the present day.<sup>3</sup>

This essay, intended as a brief response to that need for proper contextualisation, attempts to outline—in language and examples accessible to non-specialist readers, as well as more scholarly audiences—some of the most basic features of that universal hermeneutical situation (i.e., one that applies intrinsically and necessarily to the moral and spiritual testing situations, responsibilities and obligations engaging *all* human beings) which is presupposed in all of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings, although it is most richly developed in his magnum opus, the immense ‘Meccan Illuminations’ (*al-Futûhât al-Makkiyya*). That essential hermeneutical problematic—which, as our famous opening Qur’anic passage clearly indicates, applies to all of our earthly existence—is beautifully summarised in a key eschatological passage near the end of chapter 64, where Ibn ‘Arabî has begun to prepare his readers for the proper approach to understanding his long following chapters on the inner spiritual meanings implicit within the fundamental acts of purification and worship (*asrâr al-‘ibâdât*).

There he explains that while that uniquely salvific Bridge through the ‘fires’ of earthly existence—described in the famous hadith of the Intercession as being ‘finer than a hair, and sharper than a sword’—is none other than the ‘divinely revealed Path’ (*al-sirât al-mashrû‘*), in reality the essential qualities of inspired insight and spiritual discernment needed to safely traverse that Bridge cannot be provided by anyone or anything outside each person’s own unique process of hermeneutical discovery or realisation. As he beautifully summarises that dilemma, the safe traversing of each of those fires, of each soul’s unique set of spiritual tests and learning experiences, requires:

...(true inner) knowledge of the divinely revealed Pathway (*ilm al-sharî‘a*)  
in this lower life. For (without that true spiritual guidance and inspiration)

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<sup>3</sup> See our basic outline of this historical heritage in the three-part study ‘Ibn ‘Arabî and His Interpreters’, in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* [JAOS], vol. 106 (1986), pp. 539-551 and pp. 733-756, and vol. 107 (1987), pp. 101-119; and ‘**Except His Face...**’: *The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabî’s Legacy*, in *JMIAS*, vol. XXIII (1998), pp. 1-13. These two articles and several dozen related historical studies and reviews are now readily available in the website volume *Ibn ‘Arabî and His Interpreters: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Perspectives*, which can be freely downloaded at the website of the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabî Society, [www.ibnarabisociety.org/IbnArabi](http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/IbnArabi).

the actual aspect of Right/Truth/Obligation with God (*wajh al-haqq 'inda Allâh*) applying to that particular problematic situation is not known. Nor do we know which of those striving to understand that has rightfully succeeded in reaching that (real and applicable meaning) in itself. So because of that (i.e., if we rely on such external claims of authority) we are led to worship according to the predominance of their suppositions (*tu'ubbidnâ bi ghalabât al-zunûn*)!

This constantly recurring spiritual dilemma, Ibn 'Arabî goes on to explain, can never be resolved simply on the basis of the outward authenticity and relative accuracy of transmission of the verbal form of those teachings. For as he points out, those traditional historical accounts, even at their best and most accurate, 'can only give us the *form of words* of the (Prophetic) saying,' by 'knowing that the Messenger...said this or did that' in some earlier, only imperfectly known circumstances. For the essential direct inspiration of the original divine intention actually pertaining to each relevant existential situation we freshly encounter is simply not accessible in terms of any external claims, authorities, or alternative interpretations:

For what we are (really) seeking is to know what should be understood from that (divine or Prophetic) saying or action, in order to apply its (relevant) judgment to this (new) problematic situation, with absolute certainty.

Now to put this fundamental point as simply as possible, every writing of Ibn 'Arabî's that I have yet encountered can ultimately be understood as providing essential elements of the appropriate practical response to that universal spiritual situation, or—to use his own pregnant expression—as a kind of comprehensively all-inclusive act of *nasîha* or 'spiritual advice'.<sup>4</sup> So whenever we look at the *Futûhât* and his other works in terms of that ineluctable

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<sup>4</sup> See the extended illustrations of this principle in the forthcoming volume *The Reflective Heart: Discovering Spiritual Intelligence in Ibn 'Arabî's 'Meccan Illuminations'* (Fons Vitae, 2005). For the key historical role of this public mission of *nasîha* in the later, Eastern period of Ibn 'Arabî's life, see the introduction to our essay 'Introducing Ibn 'Arabî's *Book of Spiritual Advice*', *JMIAS* vol. XXVIII (2000), pp. 1-18—and in particular the following key autobiographical passage from his *R. al-Mubashshirât* (translated more fully in *Some Dreams of Ibn 'Arabî*, pp. 1-3 in the *Newsletter of the Muhyiddîn Ibn 'Arabî Society*, Autumn, 1993):

I saw in a dream that I was at the Sacred Shrine in Mecca, and it was as though

hermeneutical context, the effective roles and intentions of each of their highly diverse forms of expression and teaching always come into clear focus. While on the other hand, if we approach those writings in terms of any number of other purely intellectual or worldly-practical concerns, those same works just as quickly shatter into a host of radically differing topics, approaches, perspectives, and subjects of analysis.

It may help then, in understanding why Ibn ‘Arabî’s works always look so very different depending on each reader or interpreter’s own particular hermeneutical perspective, to visualise this underlying situation in terms of the following schematic diagram, which places around the *outer* circumference of a circle what appear to us, when we approach them simply from the point of view of our determining conscious and especially unconscious ‘beliefs’ (our *i’tiqâdât*, in Ibn ‘Arabî’s own far-reaching sense of that term), as the many different constitutive elements both of the historical forms of each revelation (*shar‘*), and of their corresponding intellectual interpretations and ongoing elaboration by later historical traditions. It is important to keep in mind that the handful of particular terms and elements listed here are purely for the purpose of illustration: they could easily be expanded indefinitely to include the appropriate terminologies of many different interpretive schools, ideologies, and historical traditions. Thus ‘inside’ that circle represents the actual universal hermeneutical context of spiritual realisation,<sup>5</sup> whose most essential features are briefly

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the Resurrection had already begun. It was as though I was standing immediately in front of my Lord, with my head bowed in silence and fear of His reproaching me because of my negligence (*afrît*). But He was saying to me: ‘O My servant, don’t be afraid, for I am not asking you to do anything except to admonish [root *n-s-h*] My servants. So admonish My servants, and I will guide the people (*al-nâs*) to the straight path.’

Now when I had seen how rare it was for anyone to enter the Path of God, I had become spiritually lazy. And that night I had resolved only to concern myself with my own soul, to forget about all the other people and their condition. But then I had that dream, and the very next morning I sat down among the people and began to explain to them the clear Path and the various evils blocking the Path for each group of them, whether the learned jurists, the ‘poor’ (*al-fuqarâ’*), the Sufis or the common people. So every one of them began to oppose me and to try to destroy me, but God helped me to overcome them and protected me with a blessing and lovingmercy from Him. (The Prophet) said: ‘Religion (*al-Dîn*) is admonishment (or “straight advice,” *al-nasîha*), for God, for the leaders of the Muslims, and for the common people among them,’ as is mentioned in Muslim’s *Sahîh*.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this paper, ‘realisation’ translates the multi-faceted Arabic expression *tahqîq* (as practiced by the individual *muhaqqiq*). While Ibn ‘Arabî himself consciously uses



The remainder of this essay is divided into four sections: (I) an indication of some of the most basic features of the ‘hermeneutical crucible’ of spiritual realisation. (II) A brief discussion of the problematic role—and necessarily multiple levels and intentions—of Ibn ‘Arabî’s highly distinctive types of *writing*, when his distinctive rhetoric and language is seen in terms of the contrasting realities and perceptions represented in this diagram. (III) An equally summary discussion of a few of the most familiar illustrations of that double-sided rhetoric which recur throughout the Shaykh’s works. (IV) A short list of some of the key practical, political conditions—which are necessarily both obligations and corresponding freedoms—for spiritual realisation, which arise whenever individuals begin to take those interpretive responsibilities seriously. We conclude with a brief allusion to the recent, ongoing historical re-discovery of the manifold ways that Ibn ‘Arabî’s successors creatively applied and worked out, in their own radically differing historical and cultural situations, these wider responsibilities and political implications of his spiritual hermeneutics.

#### I. THE CONTEXT OF SPIRITUAL REALISATION:

To begin with, most people drawn to the serious study of Ibn ‘Arabî—and certainly those who choose to devote many years to developing a deeper appreciation of his teachings—are typically already motivated by lifelong spiritual concerns, accompanied by fellow ‘spiritual researchers’ (*muhaqqiqûn*), and so immersed in the ongoing processes of spiritual practice and realisation that they naturally tend to take for granted the basic features of that spiritual hermeneutical context ‘inside the circle’, without paying much attention to the wider spectrum of ways the challenges of interpretation may actually arise or be framed for others less self-consciously involved in spiritual pursuits. One way of helping to break out of those unconscious assumptions, while also providing a very practical illustration of this situation of *spiritual* hermeneutics which in itself is already nearly universal in its inclusivity, is simply to consider one of Ibn ‘Arabî’s own favourite examples: the celebrated ‘hadith of the Questioning’ at the Last Day (translated in full at the end of this essay). In that frequently reiterated divine saying (*hadîth qudsî*), whose spirit permeates all of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing, God confronts a nameless, self-righteous person (i.e., each of us) on the Last Day and challenges him, in succession, with the statements: ‘I was sick, and yet you did not visit Me’, ‘I was hungry and you did not feed Me’, and ‘I was thirsty, yet you did not give Me to drink’—before going on to explain that if person had actually responded appropriately to that human-divine Presence and painful need, each time he also ‘would have found God’, and his *own* divine solace, precisely in and through that fatefully neglected act of compassion.

Now when we bear in mind the full range of pervasive spiritual ‘maladies’, hungers and thirsts evoked throughout the Qur’an, and when we juxtapose the essential lesson illustrated here with the equally famous Prophetic hadith in which the culminating spiritual virtue of *ihsân* (recognising and realising what is both good and beautiful)—depicted as the ultimate aim of all Religion (*dîn*)—is explained as ‘worshipping God *as though you see Him...*’: then the full universality of this ‘hermeneutical crucible’ constituted by all our earthly life becomes dramatically apparent. For from that perspective, everything each person encounters in life, whether outwardly or inwardly, suddenly appears as a very concrete, infinitely demanding and illuminating, ongoing set of ‘private lessons’ from God, necessarily calling for, evoking, and teaching each of the central spiritual virtues articulated by the Qur’an and the other divine revelations.<sup>6</sup> For as Ibn ‘Arabî repeatedly points out, each of us is always simultaneously on ‘*both sides*’ of this recurring Encounter, gradually learning the transforming reality of divine Compassion through our own suffering as well as through our responses—and failures to respond—to the sufferings of others.

While some reflection is of course required at first to connect these revelatory teachings with their actual concrete illustrations in our own experience, once that indispensable connection has been established, over time even a little further reflection will quickly bring up the following essential features of this universal hermeneutical situation. Each person can quickly expand the very abstract points listed here:

- The ‘Unique Point’ (*nuqta*) of time and circumstance: While the circle of the diagram above has to be drawn large simply to allow for the text surrounding it, everything in Ibn ‘Arabî’s teaching—especially his principle of the ‘ever-renewed Creation’ of all things at every instant—highlights the fact that our individual freedom and corresponding responsibility, the particular ‘interpretation’ constantly required of us by God, necessarily relates to the very particular challenges of the unique situation, possibilities, and constraints posed for each individual by *this*

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<sup>6</sup> See the more detailed discussion of this fundamental contrast, which permeates the entire Qur’an, between the difficult attainment of the true spiritual virtues and their illusory, socially validated substitutes in the chapter on ‘The Mysteries of *Ihsân*: Natural Contemplation and the Spiritual Virtues in the Qur’an’, included in our forthcoming volume *Openings: From the Qur’an to the Islamic Humanities*. For a shorter discussion of these same issues, in more metaphysical terms relating directly to the divine ‘Signs’ and ‘Books’ of creation and the human soul, see our Introductions to *Orientations: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation* (London, Archetype, 2004) and to *The Reflective Heart* (n. 4 above).

particular instant (*waqt*). So when we are ‘lost in thought’, intellectual elaboration, or the many states of puzzlement or heedlessness, we are necessarily somewhere ‘outside’ that circle (or point) of what is truly real.

- Those particular divine lessons that constitute each person’s spiritual life always involve a unique, intrinsically individual, and shifting set of highly specific personal ‘dispositions’ and spiritual potentials (*khalq*, *isti’dâd*, etc.), which Ibn ‘Arabî typically alludes to with the deceptively simple reference to the divine ‘Providential Caring’ (*inâya*) that has brought each soul to this uniquely particular spiritual state and situation. We are all very well aware—and Ibn ‘Arabî repeatedly takes great pains to highlight this fundamental reality—that most individuals’ very different relative capacities to live ‘inside the circle’, to accurately perceive and respond appropriately, with true *ihsân*, to the manifold sufferings of those all around us, seem at first glance to be something relatively innate or divinely given, without much relation either to study or conscious effort: indeed small children often seem far more accomplished at actually practicing this fundamental spiritual responsibility than most adults.
- Within the hermeneutic circle of actual spiritual experience and testing, Ibn ‘Arabî loves to remind his readers that every particular spiritual testing situation is unique and never-repeated. Since our normal intellect intrinsically works with abstractions and general principles, and takes pride in its accumulation of ‘lessons’ and knowledge, framed by its natural unconscious reliance on ‘custom’ (*âda*) and visible, apparent causes (*asbâb*), this is a particularly pertinent lesson that we tend to have to rediscover periodically.
- The real process of spiritual hermeneutics always requires an ongoing dynamic interplay between the inexplicable ‘vertical’ divine element of illumination (or grace, in all its forms) and our gradually maturing faculty of spiritual intelligence: i.e., the ever-renewed spiral of realisation (or *mi’râj*: whether momentarily ascending or apparently descending) that takes place in the interactions between the moment’s particular spiritual problem, the divine element of illuminating insight, the ensuing challenges of its practical application, and further reflection on the observed

consequences and lessons of that application.<sup>7</sup>

- If we look more closely at the role of external ‘spiritual teachings’ (of whatever source or expression) in the actual living context of each individual’s spiritual growth, we can repeatedly see that the actual spiritual process of this ‘existential hermeneutic’ typically involves the effective simultaneous integration and application—most often implicit (i.e., not consciously or separately distinguished)—of many key elements that would appear intellectually, from ‘outside’ the circle of realisation, as disparate and separate teachings. In Qur’anic terms, this reality is expressed in the fact that reference to the all-encompassing spiritual virtue of faith (*îmân*) always precedes its pairing with its spiritually appropriate, creative expression in the corresponding right responses (*sâlihât*). Equally importantly, we quickly discover that the actual practice of spiritual hermeneutics in reality always involves the implicit application or ‘existential interpretation’ of what are in reality almost endless ‘scriptural’ exhortations (Qur’anic verses, hadith, etc.)—just as the individually ‘named’ spiritual virtues can rarely be separated from each other in real-life testing situations.<sup>8</sup>
- One telling ‘subjective’ feature of the actual process of spiritual practice and hermeneutics which is particularly highlighted in some of Ibn ‘Arabî’s most distinctive teachings, as in his characteristic presentation of earlier Islamic and Sufi tradition, is the gradually maturing awareness of the *divine* (in all its manifestations and effects) as the real ‘actor’ and ‘interpreter’—as expressed, for example, in the Shaykh’s characteristic emphases on the reliance of the spiritually mature soul on silence, listening, surrender, spiritual repose, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Again, see the more detailed explanations and illustrations of this principle in the Introduction and throughout *The Reflective Heart* (n. 4 above).

<sup>8</sup> See the detailed dramatic illustration and analysis of these spiritual principles in our discussion of the Sura of Joseph: *Dramatizing the Sura of Joseph: An Introduction to the Islamic Humanities*, in the Annemarie Schimmel Festschrift, special issue of the *Journal of Turkish Studies* vol. 18 (1994), pp. 201-224, to be included in expanded form in *Openings: From the Qur’an to the Islamic Humanities* (forthcoming).

<sup>9</sup> See the extensive illustrations of these basic principles of Ibn ‘Arabî’s spiritual psychology in Chapters 1 and 2 of *The Reflective Heart*.

- Turning to the practical consequences of this hermeneutical context of realisation, and flowing from the uniquely individual factors highlighted in each of the preceding points, even a small degree of spiritual practice quickly reveals the typical uniqueness and contextual specificity of all those (intellectually expressible) ‘answers’ acquired in the actual process of learning and growth. That is why, as each reader of Ibn ‘Arabî must actually discover from his or her own experience and practical application of his teaching, while on the one hand virtually everything that the Shaykh wrote can be viewed initially as in some sense ‘Ibn ‘Arabî’s *ta’wîl*’ (interpretation of the Islamic scriptures)—at the same time, his writings cannot be usefully appropriated (explained, summarised, or reduced to simpler terms) except by *individually passing through the actual spiritual processes that gave rise to those particular ‘openings’*.<sup>10</sup>
- A second practical consequence of the actual realised practice of spiritual hermeneutics—and one that is constantly and quite typically emphasised by Ibn ‘Arabî (no doubt explaining and typifying his later epithet as ‘the greatest Master’, *al-shaykh al-akbar*)—is the gradual discovery of *expanding circles of responsibility and of spiritually effective ‘action’*, on different planes and in many outwardly different spheres of action. The remainder of this essay focuses on some of those recurrent political dimensions of spiritual responsibility as they emerge, again and again, from that unique testing context of spiritual hermeneutics.
- One final noteworthy practical consequence of this particular hermeneutical context is of course a dramatically heightened awareness of the indispensable practical role and influences of *spiritually realised individuals*, again on many different planes: or in other words, the multi-faceted reality of *walâya*, which is probably the most distinctive and pervasive theme of the Shaykh’s writings and teaching.

Now while the brief description of each of these points has been phrased here in positive terms, one could certainly add to this list of implications of the hermeneutical challenges of spiritual realisation a corresponding heightened awareness of the very limited

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<sup>10</sup> And at that point, as Titus Burckhardt has ironically pointed out in a most memorable tale of his own youthful discovery of the *Futûhât* (in his foreword to Austen’s translation of the *Fusûs al-Hikam*), one no longer needs Ibn ‘Arabî’s books to discover those actual inspired interpretations.

direct practical efficacy (in every known historical context, not just in Ibn ‘Arabî’s own tradition) of external writings, teachings, intellectual interpretations, and any number of other historical institutions ostensibly devoted to public religious teaching and guidance—and a similar awareness of the richness and infinite mysteries of the effective creative transmutation of those external forms into the lastingly effective local forms of the ‘Islamic humanities’. The wider practical creative and political tasks, and the unavoidable conflicts, which are revealed by that recurrent tension are outlined in the remaining sections of this essay, beginning with their manifestations in some of the peculiar rhetorical features of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing.

## II. ‘STRADDLING THE LINE’: RECOGNISING THE MULTIPLE AIMS OF IBN ‘ARABÎ’S *WRITING*

Most of the points just made about the intrinsic features of the actual hermeneutical context of spiritual realisation initially tend to highlight the practically indispensable roles, at every stage, of living,<sup>11</sup> effective spiritual guides and teachers. Often that recurrent awareness, in the many branches of Islamic spirituality just as in other practical spiritual traditions, has led to an understandable knowing deprecation (as in the famous Taoist dictum ‘he who speaks does not know...’) of the roles and claims of those religious writers and related formal institutions who happen to be acting primarily ‘outside the circle’ of actual spiritual realisation. That sort of judgment that is sometimes evident, for example, in the cautious or even openly critical attitude of certain Sufi teachers, both past and present, with regard to the prolific and wide-ranging, highly intellectual literary output of Ibn ‘Arabî in particular. But that is surely not the whole story, as we can readily see simply by noting the ongoing wider spiritual influences, as visible in our own day as in past centuries, of these and other written masterpieces of the Islamic humanities.

We have already devoted a number of more detailed studies (and several recent and forthcoming books) to carefully illustrating and explaining the distinctive features of Ibn ‘Arabî’s ‘rhetoric’—the complex relationship between his characteristic forms of writing and their different intended audiences—in terms of his own explicit epistemological explanations and assumptions, since those issues are such essential prolegomena to any serious study and

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<sup>11</sup> An essential quality never to be confused, in any spiritual tradition, with simply ‘existing bodily on earth’.

appreciation of his writings.<sup>12</sup> Within the context of this essay, though, the essential conclusion of those scholarly studies can be stated much more simply: all of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing—from the spiritually autobiographical, mysteriously veiled poetic and symbolic texts of his early life in the Maghreb to the better-known longer works from his later Eastern period of self-consciously public and wide-ranging ‘wise-counsel’ (*nasîha*)—tends to straddle the invisible ‘boundary’ of the hermeneutical circle introduced above, simultaneously expressing two different ‘faces’ and two very different aims and possibilities, depending on whether it is read from the perspective of beliefs and suppositions (masquerading as socially accepted ‘knowledge’), or the perspective of realised spiritual knowing.

On one level, for that relatively restricted set of readers and students who would already approach Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings from the perspective of their own spiritual practice and individual tasks of spiritual hermeneutics, his books, taken together, cover and exemplify virtually the entire spectrum of literary devices, topics, methods, and creative approaches to the problems of spiritual realisation that were developed within the preceding Islamic tradition (including many important elements of earlier Hellenistic and Arab heritages already deeply integrated in that tradition). Thus in this particular respect, just as each accomplished spiritual guide already integrates all those equally indispensable dimensions of the actual (not just historical) ongoing divine revelation (*shar‘*) so completely and profoundly that they are able to apply that divine wisdom appropriately to each of the new and uniquely individual circumstances that we outlined in the preceding section—so likewise Ibn ‘Arabî’s *Futûhât*, for example, might equally be described as comprehensive guidebook ‘for the person who has no shaykh’.<sup>13</sup> Or more realistically, given the intrinsic challenges, and uniquely universal perspectives, of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing, one could conceive of his extraordinarily demanding texts functioning ideally as a kind of ongoing ‘teacher of shaykhs’.<sup>14</sup> In any event, as recent historical and manuscript studies are increasingly

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<sup>12</sup> See especially the recent studies cited in notes 2 and 4 above.

<sup>13</sup> As a kind of *Kitâb man lâ yahduruhu al-shaykh*, to use the formulaic title of a familiar Arabic literary genre of practical handbooks for such fields as medicine and law.

<sup>14</sup> This particular role of the study of the *Futûhât*, among the heads of many different Sufi orders in Ottoman Istanbul, down almost to the present day, is memorably described in Victoria R. Holbrooke’s ‘Ibn ‘Arabi and Ottoman Dervish Traditions: The Melâmî Supra-

revealing, there is no doubt that the widest circle of influences of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings has always been through the combination of their direct and indirect usage in the full range of actual situations of spiritual guidance and direction, whether within the later institutionalised Sufi orders or in the wider, usually unacknowledged borrowing of his teachings and hermeneutics by preachers, teachers, and others working in more publicly visible arenas.<sup>15</sup>

In reality, though, Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings are for the most part unlike the texts typically associated with spiritual traditions in Islam in two very distinctive and pervasive ways. First, there is his characteristic insistence—deeply rooted in his own key spiritual experiences and understanding of his own personal destiny and mission<sup>16</sup>—on *visibly and emphatically* connecting every aspect of his spiritual understanding and communication directly with its ultimate ‘roots’ (spiritual, at least as much as historical) in the Qur’an and the Prophetic example.<sup>17</sup> Secondly—and intrinsically rooted in the preceding distinctive feature—there is

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Order,’ Part One and Part Two, in *Journal of the Muhyiddîn Ibn ‘Arabî Society*, IX (1991), pp. 18-35, and XII (1992), pp. 15-33.

<sup>15</sup> For a number of telling contemporary illustrations of this phenomenon, which examines more closely the larger question of ‘influences’ in this domain, see our recent study ‘Ibn ‘Arabî in the “Far West”: Visible and Invisible Influences’, *JMIAS* XXIX (2001), pp. 87-122, and “‘Except His Face...’: The Political and Aesthetic Dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabî’s Legacy’, *JMIAS* XXIII (1998), pp. 1-13. As pointed out there, the usual historical assumptions and text-based methods of analysis and demonstration of influences are particularly limited in contexts focused on actual spiritual realisation (rather than text-centred intellectual disciplines)—limitations that are further aggravated by the widespread prevalence after Ibn ‘Arabî’s death of polemical contexts in which writers often had powerful reasons not to mention explicitly their debts to his works. The effects of that recurrent historical consideration are illustrated in detail in our earlier case-study, *The Wisdom of the Throne: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mulla Sadra* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981; revised paperback edition forthcoming); see also n. 40 below.

<sup>16</sup> The basic autobiographical framework of his self-conception as the ‘Seal of the Muhammadan Saints’ is introduced in the excellent biographies by S. Hirtenstein [*The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn ‘Arabî*. (Oxford, Anqa Publishers/White Cloud Press, 1999)] and Claude Addas, and discussed in greater detail in M. Chodkiewicz’ *Le Sceau des saints: Prophétie et sainteté dans la doctrine d’Ibn ‘Arabî*. Paris, Gallimard, 1986. [English translation by L. Sherrard, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabî*. (Cambridge, Islamic Texts Society, 1993).] See also Ibn ‘Arabî’s own autobiographical account of his transforming experience of the all-encompassing reality of the Qur’an, as he describes it in a key passage from chapter 367 of his *Futûhât*, translated in ‘The Spiritual Ascension: Ibn ‘Arabî and the *Mi‘râj*’, *JAOS* vol. 107 (1987), pp. 629-652, and vol. 108 (1988), pp. 63-77.

<sup>17</sup> To avoid any possible misunderstanding of this point, it is sufficient simply to compare Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing either with any of the classical early Sufi ‘manuals’ (Qushayri,

his more problematic insistence on connecting his distinctive spiritual insights and teaching with an endless host of related features drawn from virtually the entire extant body of both the ‘religious’ and the ‘intellectual’ (scientific) learned traditions of his own time: i.e., with the various intellectual disciplines lying ‘outside’ the circle in our diagram here. Taken together, those two characteristic and relatively unusual features of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing mean that the greater part of it, especially from the post-Maghrebi period of his teaching, is largely inaccessible in its original form to anyone but the most highly educated and inquisitive intellectual elites: i.e., not just the relatively small group of highly trained, fully Arabic-literate ‘*ulamâ*’ and ‘*hukamâ*’—themselves a very small urban minority in pre-modern agrarian societies—but at best to an unusually curious and personally interested, highly motivated subset of those scholars, who have already spent years acquiring the requisite formation and background in each of those demanding intellectual disciplines.<sup>18</sup>

To put the implications of all this more directly, in terms of our diagram introduced earlier, these two quite distinctive features of Ibn ‘Arabî’s work mean that one of the unique and consciously central audiences for of Ibn ‘Arabî’s distinctive body of writing was the most highly educated—and therefore often politically, culturally, and educationally influential—*intellectual* representatives of those diverse intellectual traditions (both religious and philosophical) scattered around the ‘outside’ of our circle of spiritual realisation. The result of his focus on those learned audiences, as we shall see in more detail below, is that these

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Makki, etc.) or with any of the masterpieces of the Islamic humanities in other languages (‘Attar, Rumi, Hafiz, and so on). All of the Islamic humanities, whatever their particular artistic form and cultural setting, are of course profoundly rooted in and inspired by the same scriptural sources—but what sets a work like the *Futûhât* apart from them is precisely Ibn ‘Arabî’s thoroughgoing pedagogical concern, at every stage of exposition, to relate his teachings and expressions explicitly and unambiguously to a scrupulously ‘literal’ reading of the actual words of the Qur’an and hadith. See the fuller discussion of this issue in our study ‘Situating Islamic “Mysticism”: Between Written Traditions and Popular Spirituality,’ in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics and Typologies*, ed. R. Herrera (New York/Berlin, Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 293-334.

<sup>18</sup> In this respect, the inherent challenges for modern translators and interpreters attempting to communicate Ibn ‘Arabî’s teaching—discussed in detail in ‘Ibn ‘Arabî’s Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and “Translating” the *Meccan Illuminations*’ (n. 2 above)—were already largely shared by most earlier non-Arab, non-scholarly Muslim audiences interested in his work. However, the inherent obstacles raised by the use of such highly intellectual and culture-specific forms of expression are in any case immediately apparent to modern-day readers encountering the numerous recent translations of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing using the language of such traditional disciplines as ontology, cosmology, theology (of the divine ‘Names’, in particular), law, and so on.

particular literary features implicitly reflect correspondingly wide-ranging *political* intentions underlying—and potentially illuminating—these two very distinctive aspects of the Shaykh’s writing.

Ordinarily, of course, as was painfully obvious in Ibn ‘Arabî’s own time just as much as in our own, the learned practitioners of those intellectual disciplines, whether religious or philosophico-scientific, often have their feet firmly planted ‘outside’ the circle of conscious spiritual realization, in the narrowly self-involved pursuit of those intellectual traditions and their own appealing this-worldly rewards.<sup>19</sup> Ibn ‘Arabî has a number of memorably appropriate things to say about such ‘learned’ groups in his own day, but his own creative, extraordinarily comprehensive lifelong response to their claims and pretensions obviously goes far beyond the facile stereotypes of each age’s polemics and public controversy—a sterile approach which in fact he categorically rejects, on profoundly Qur’anic grounds, in a number of still very topical passages. First, the inventive rhetorical ways in which he evokes, presents and engages each of those learned disciplines clearly are meant to function as challenging, intellectually complex spiritual ‘reminders’: as such, they make it possible to ‘convert’—i.e., to bring partially within this hermeneutical circle of conscious spiritual realisation—at least some of the expert practitioners of those learned disciplines. In doing so, the Shaykh is encouraging them to turn their own teaching and practice of those traditional intellectual schools into newly effective vehicles for awakening, in themselves and their spiritually apt students and mass of ‘followers’ (their *muqalladûn*, in Ibn ‘Arabî’s language), a deeper awareness of the actual tasks and opportunities for spiritual realisation within their own particular circumstances.

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<sup>19</sup> See the detailed references to key aspects of his often openly critical attitude to the ‘*ulamâ*’ of his time and to his understanding of the wider issue of *taqlîd* that are brought together in our study of ‘Spiritual Authority and Universal Revelation: Ibn ‘Arabî’s Re-conception of the Foundations of Islamic “Law”,’ to appear in *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: Critical Concepts in Islamic Thought*, ed. I. Netton, (Routledge, 2005), based on the earlier essay ‘Ibn ‘Arabî’s “Esotericism”: The Problem of Spiritual Authority,’ *Studia Islamica*, LXXI (1990), pp. 37-64. More dramatically forceful illustrations of this critical attitude are also now readily accessible in our translation of key sections of chapter 366 (on the figure of the Mahdi), which demonstrably influenced later messianic movements in many parts of the Islamic world, included in *Ibn ‘Arabî: The Meccan Revelations*, vol. I (NY, Pir Press, 2002), and more fully contextualised in ‘Ibn ‘Arabî’s Messianic Secret: From “The Mahdî” to the Imamate of Every Soul’, in *JMIAS* vol. XXX (2001), pp. 1-19.

Secondly, even among the larger group of those intellectuals and powerful practitioners of those religious disciplines who remain (in Max Weber’s memorable phrase) ‘spiritually tone-deaf’, Ibn ‘Arabî’s impressively thoroughgoing and profoundly original linkage of the practices, conditions and expressions of the spiritual life with every conceivable dimension of the Qur’an and hadith (and the related historical forms of their study and transmission) means that—within those recurrent situations of political, cultural and social conflict that are historically inseparable from the effective expression of spiritual realisation and creativity—those publicly influential religious scholars and intellectuals are at least somewhat more likely to evince a cautionary minimum of practical tolerance and open-mindedness with regard to unfamiliar spiritual activities and their creative manifestations.

We have only to think of the very different examples and influences, for example, of an al-Ghazâlî and an Ibn Taymiyya, in order to envisage the full spectrum of practical possibilities that are raised here, and to recognise the ongoing political and historical importance of these far-reaching political intentions guiding and underlying Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing. So we turn in the next section to several relatively familiar illustrations of how this intentionally multi-faceted rhetoric actually functions in the Shaykh’s writings; and finally (in section IV) to briefly highlighting the Shaykh’s ongoing concern with the impressive range of political implications—both freedoms and corresponding individual obligations—inevitably raised by the wider process of spiritual realisation, as each generation of seekers rediscovers and wrestles with the familiar dilemmas posed by our earthly existence simultaneously ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ our figurative circle of spiritual realisation.

### III. ‘SEEING WITH BOTH EYES’: THE WIDER CIRCLES OF RESPONSIBILITY

Recognising the larger unifying political themes and intentions that pervade all of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing is difficult for several reasons. Most important, certainly, is the long-established association of his work and teachings in the centuries following his death—both by its defenders and by many polemical critics—with historically later institutions and forms of ‘Sufism’ and popular religious and devotional life. There are indeed important and valid reasons for that later historical association, which we will return to briefly in our Conclusion. But here it is sufficient simply to place the *Futûhât* side-by-side with Rumi’s near-contemporary and at least equally influential and encyclopedic *Spiritual Masnavî*, for example, in order to recognise quite clearly and unmistakably the radically distinctive rhetoric, audiences, and characteristic interpretive approaches of the Shaykh’s work that we have just briefly outlined. Such a comparison also dramatically highlights the peculiar

*intentional difficulty* and (at first encounter) almost perversely complex literary structures and assumptions of the majority of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings, which seem in many cases forthrightly designed to put off all but the most highly motivated ‘inside’ readers<sup>20</sup>—and which we know sometimes mystified, in places, even his own long-time disciples!

A second, equally understandable factor in obscuring these unifying political concerns is the fact that learned scholarly interpreters of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings—in the past at least as much as today—have almost exclusively tended to focus on a relatively limited set of issues, topics, or approaches dictated by the intellectual ‘intersection’ between the Shaykh’s own texts and the distinctive concerns of particular intellectual disciplines (familiar to the later interpreter) clearly lying somewhere among those listed outside the circumference of our circle here.<sup>21</sup> Even a cursory glance at past commentaries or most modern studies of Ibn ‘Arabî beautifully illustrates that familiar interpretive process, which at best tends to arrive at an intellectually coherent image of the Shaykh’s purported ‘doctrine’ or ‘system’ profoundly rooted in the particular interpreter’s own assumptions and preoccupations.

Now one more cohesive and practically accessible approach to rediscovering and actually recognising these unifying political intentions, especially for students with only a very limited acquaintance with Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings and the many unfamiliar intellectual disciplines he addresses, is to begin directly with our own easily replicable experience of the wider *practical pre-conditions*—simultaneously appearing both as necessary freedoms and spiritual obligations—that naturally arise, in every historical setting, simply within the process of spiritual realisation itself. That is the starting point of the following section (IV).

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<sup>20</sup> This quality is particularly obvious, of course, in the particularly mysterious symbolic and often more autobiographical works, in both prose and poetry, from Ibn ‘Arabî’s youthful period in the Maghreb (*K. al-Isrâ’*, *‘Anqâ’ Mughrib*, and so on), prior to his receiving his mission for more public dissemination of his teaching and acts of *nasîha*: for the most part, those earlier writings have only been decipherable through careful comparison with a wide range of illuminating passages from his *Futûhât* and other later compositions.

<sup>21</sup> This is particularly evident in the long—and extraordinarily influential, both culturally and politically—line of philosophico-theological commentaries on Ibn ‘Arabî’s *Fusûs al-Hikam*, focusing on the intersection of his teachings with prevailing philosophical (Avicennan) and theological (F. Râzî, etc. issues and conceptions, that was inaugurated by his son-in-law and close disciple, Sadr al-Dîn al-Qûnawî. See now the seminal discussion of Qûnawî’s own highly creative role in this process by Richard Todd, in his recent (2005) Oxford PhD thesis (*Writing in the Book of the World*), which will hopefully soon be more widely available in published form.

Here, though, we may begin by mentioning three typical illustrations of this wider rhetorical approach, focusing on recurrent practical and methodological differences that are likely to be familiar in each case to serious readers of the Shaykh today, even to those limited to the increasing body of English or French-language studies and translations. In each instance, when we look more closely, we can see how Ibn ‘Arabî’s distinctive rhetoric allows him to communicate in very different, but equally necessary and beneficial, ways to audiences situated ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ the circle of realisation. For his own spiritual colleagues and collaborators ‘inside’ the circle of spiritual realisation, his abstract theological and metaphysical discussions are clearly intended to heighten and inform their nascent awareness that the ultimate perfection (*kamâl*) of human responsibility always involves the rare mature ability to see the human situation, as his later interpreters put it, ‘with both eyes’, and hence to act creatively through all the appropriate means, following the Prophetic example, to further the enlightened awareness of ‘things as they really are’.<sup>22</sup>

On the other hand, for those learned readers approaching his work from the limited perspective of their inherited ambient beliefs and suppositions (*zunûn*) or unconscious ignorance, each of these methodological discussions has two distinct aims and possible outcomes. On one level, Ibn ‘Arabî’s words normally constitute a dramatic, multi-faceted *invitation* to move beyond the restrictions of belief and physically (or logically) circumscribed ‘thinking’ (*fikr*, or ‘*aql* in its restrictive sense), both calling into question the epistemological limits of those restricted standpoints and simultaneously suggesting possible alternative pathways of spiritual realisation. Less ambitiously, but politically no less significant, Ibn ‘Arabî’s elaborately careful theological and methodological discussions tend to help defuse an all too familiar set of stock accusations and stereotyped criticisms—some far more practically threatening than others—that religious intellectuals in Islam, as in every civilisation, repeatedly tend to apply to the locally pertinent claims and practices of spiritual realisation: e.g., fears of supposed anarchy, messianism, revolutionary chiliasm, quietism, antinomianism, dualism, idolatry, and so on. Of course the actual prevention and avoidance of such pitfalls and dangers, both individual and collective, is a basic practical function of spiritual guides and teachers in all spiritual traditions (in Islam and elsewhere), and such concerns are frequently dealt with throughout the literature of Sufism in every period. But

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<sup>22</sup> Referring to the famous Prophetic prayer, which Ibn ‘Arabî often alludes to: ‘O my God, cause me to see things as they really are.’

Ibn ‘Arabî’s learned discussion of these issues is aimed at a different, necessarily scholarly audience, and is thereby intended to potentially limit and overcome those official fears and resulting restrictions which inevitably tend to conflict with spiritually active movements in almost any political and cultural setting.

#### A. THEOLOGY AND METAPHYSICS: THE UNIVERSALITY OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

One of the central preoccupations of Ibn ‘Arabî’s interpreters, past and present, has been his recurrent concern with highlighting—both in the literal symbolic terms of Islamic scripture and in more abstract theological and metaphysical language—the absolute universality of each of the key dimensions or elements of the spiritual life. (Indeed, as we have pointed out elsewhere, his approaches in that area were so persuasive and comprehensive that they tended to inspire first the most influential Muslim ‘official theologies’ of many multi-religious, multi-cultural regions during the centuries of extraordinary spiritual creativity and expansion following his death, while over the past century they have played an equally central role in developing the conceptual frameworks of the modern study of religion.)<sup>23</sup> However, the very familiarity of this central dimension of universality in his writing—even before its philosophical elaboration by the commentators of the *Fusûs al-Hikam*—tends to blind us to the simpler fact that those actually practicing the spiritual life do not necessarily even need such reminders. To recall that fundamental ‘hadith of the Questioning’ with which we began this essay, the real-life situations of spiritual testing and learning are universally present and compelling in their own right, standing immediately before us wherever we find ourselves.

Here again, the highly intellectualised abstract expressions of this unifying theme in its different theological and metaphysical contexts are addressed above all to intellectuals (self-styled ‘*ulamâ*’ of one discipline or another) who may at least be persuaded by Ibn ‘Arabî’s arguments to tolerate—or perhaps even to begin to investigate and explore for themselves—unfamiliar spiritual phenomena and claims that they might otherwise negate or, given the necessary political influence, even suppress out of hand.

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<sup>23</sup> In addition to the two articles cited at n. 15 above, see also the forthcoming studies ‘Ibn ‘Arabî in the “Far West”: Spiritual Influences and the Science of Spirituality,’ to appear in *Journal of the History of Sufism*, V (2006) (special issue: proceedings of Kyoto Conference on Ibn ‘Arabî’s Influences in Asia, ed. Y. Tonaga); and ‘From Cordoba to Isfahan, and Beyond: Mulla Sadra, Ibn ‘Arabî and the Emerging Science of Spirituality,’ to appear in *Proceedings of the Isfahan Conference on Islamic Philosophy* (‘Cordoba and Isfahan: Two Schools of Islamic Philosophy’), ed. H. Landolt and M. Mohaghegh.

For those more consciously practising their spiritual life ‘within the circle’ of realisation, on the other hand, the abstract philosophical or theological discussions of this theme are just the tip of the iceberg: in fact, what lends such discussions their life and appeal and lasting interest is the actual experiential ‘*phenomenology of spiritual life*’ scattered so memorably throughout Ibn ‘Arabî’s writings, and pre-eminently in his *Futûhât*. In that respect, Ibn ‘Arabî’s work provides a vast phenomenological panorama of the spectrum, prospects and potential forms of actual spiritual realisation that certainly has no equivalent in Islamic literature, and perhaps even in any other world-religion. From within the circle of spiritual realisation, then, the message conveyed by precisely this same language of universality is a radically different one indeed: one of humility, self-knowledge (in the sense of the growing awareness of one’s creaturely limits and corresponding total dependency on God), surrender, and spiritually effective ‘openness’ (*taslîm*) in every dimension of one’s life—a realisation epitomised in Ibn ‘Arabî’s repeated evocation of the Prophet’s telling prayer: ‘O my Lord, increase me in knowing...!’ (*rabbî zidnî ‘ilm<sup>an</sup>*).

#### B: THE LIMITS OF PHYSICAL OBSERVATION AND LOGICAL DEMONSTRATION

Another, almost equally recurrent (and indeed closely related) hermeneutical theme in Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing—again familiar from a number of arguments in the *Fusûs*, but highlighted even more strongly in the Shaykh’s Introduction (*muqaddima*) to his *Futûhât*—is his emphasis on the intrinsic *limitations* of unilluminated human ‘rationalising’: i.e., ‘*aql*, in its etymologically restrictive sense, which he usually points out when he is using that Arabic term in this particular way. Our individual ‘ratiocination’ in that limited sense, he points out, is already inadequate to understand more than a few of the actual meanings of the revealed scriptural symbols, and its inherent inadequacies are even more obvious in the Aristotelian philosophers’ continued reliance on their proven methods of logic and rational demonstration once they have moved beyond the outwardly observable phenomena of the physical universe.<sup>24</sup> Indeed there are a number of well-known extended passages and sometimes comic personal anecdotes, directly evoking Ibn ‘Arabî’s own encounters with such adherents of *falsafa*, scattered throughout the *Futûhât*—most extensively in the elaborate contrast of the

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<sup>24</sup> See the detailed enumeration of important discussions of this theme, from throughout the *Futûhât*, in the pioneering article of Franz Rosenthal, ‘Ibn ‘Arabî Between “Philosophy” and “Mysticism”,’ in *Oriens*, vol. 31 (1988), pp. 1-35. Many of the passages analysed by Prof. Rosenthal have to do particularly with the politico-legal implications of the contrasts Ibn ‘Arabî often draws between the roles and limitations of the limited individual intellect (‘*aql*) and inspired revelation (*shar‘*).

very different ‘ascensions’ of the intellectual (Avicennan philosopher) and the spiritual ‘knower’/seeker in his famous chapter 167, on the ‘Alchemy of True Happiness’.<sup>25</sup>

Again, these recurrent methodological and epistemological cautions are clearly meant to be taken very differently from outside and inside the circle of spiritual realisation. For those learned audiences whose very lives and disciplines are entirely caught up in this kind of inherently restrictive intellectualising, of course, Ibn ‘Arabî’s remarks are at least a provocative and cautionary reminder of the unexamined assumptions and possible limitations of their own perspectives. As such, they are also an ‘invitation to dance’ inside the circle of spiritual realization, to discover significant realities lying beyond the limitations of those disciplines and approaches—or again, to enter into a new kind of spiritual dialogue whose results and premises, much less its ultimate outcome, are as yet unknown. For Ibn ‘Arabî’s considerable familiarity with the language and outlook of those religio-intellectual disciplines is a powerful indication that he is anything but a pure ‘irrationalist’ or inspired ‘enthusiast’, devoid of any interest in wider understanding and communication—which is of course the intellectual’s standard pejorative stereotype of ‘mystics’ throughout many different religious traditions.

For Ibn ‘Arabî’s colleagues and ‘fellows’ (*ashâb, qawm, tâ’ifa*) in the individual hermeneutical process of actual spiritual realisation, of course, these passages in which he highlights the inherent limitations of ratiocination, far from marking some ‘end’ of the active role of reason and intellectual reflection, are instead meant to point to the truly endless tasks of *spiritual* intelligence or wise discernment (*hikma*) at every stage of the process of realization—a process whose very goal is active existential conformity (*‘ibâda*) to that ‘First

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<sup>25</sup> It is surely no accident that Ibn ‘Arabî actually begins his basic Introduction (*muqaddima*) to the entire *Futûhât* with a careful and elaborate epistemological discussion of the limitations and respective domains of the different intellectual and spiritual faculties and capacities that are essential for understanding the remainder of that immense work. See the translation of key elements of that discussion in ‘How to Study the *Futûhât*: Ibn ‘Arabî’s Own Advice’, pp. 73-89 in *Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabî: 750th Anniversary Commemoration Volume*, ed. S. Hirtenstein and M. Tiernan (Shaftesbury, Element Books, 1993), and the more extensive analysis of that passage and its relationship to the forms of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing in the article cited at n. 2 above (‘Ibn ‘Arabî’s Rhetoric of Realisation: Keys to Reading and “Translating” the *Meccan Illuminations*’).

Intellect' (*'aql*) which is Itself the all-encompassing 'Muhammadan Reality' and common Ground of each of the prophets and divine messengers.<sup>26</sup>

### C. THE TENSION OF SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL 'ETHICS': DISCOVERING NON-DUALISM

In one very peculiar sense, theologians and other public moralists standing 'outside' the circle of spiritual realisation—whatever the particular religion or polity in question<sup>27</sup>—are always right in their perennial suspicion of 'what must be going on' inside that dangerously unknown territory. For two of the most fundamental requisites of spiritual growth and discernment, the most basic 'tickets' for consciously entering this circle of realisation, are the admission of one's profound ignorance (in so many different domains), and the dawning recognition that the most important and lasting lessons are those we learn precisely from our unveiled mistakes and inadequacies. In most spiritual literatures, whatever the tradition in question, these 'politically incorrect' basic facts of life are only rarely or quietly mentioned, despite their indispensable pedagogical role in actual practice and even the most basic development of self-awareness.

Now whether we find ourselves outside or inside this circle, the inchoate awareness of those unnameable fears and dangers lying in that usually unacknowledged spiritual ignorance typically give rise to the recurrent psychic reactions of *dualism* (good vs. 'evil'), *projection* (the 'other' as purely evil), together with the *reification* (of both those extremes) and unacknowledged idolatry (or in Qur'anic terms, spiritual 'hypocrisy') that such familiar reactions always entail. Indeed this is so much the case that what we normally call 'history' is little more than the endlessly repeated catalogue of the *collective* manifestations of those reactions. In dramatic contrast, the entire process of spiritual growth and realisation—at least at the preliminary levels that normally concern most of us—is largely devoted to exploring and learning to recognise, process, contextualise and integrate those unavoidable initial reactions, in increasingly challenging and probing ways. In addition, this is a domain in which the gradual individual discovery of *spiritual* ethics—based on the ever-expanding demands and obligations of real inspired knowing (*ma'rifa*, or *'ilm* in its actual Qur'anic sense)—necessarily comes into conflict in various ways with the previously unconscious,

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<sup>26</sup> See the development of this theme (illustrated by hundreds of translated passages from the *Futûhât*) throughout *The Reflective Heart...* (n. 4 above).

<sup>27</sup> In this respect, as in so many others, Plato's Socratic dialogues provide memorable illustrations of the most fundamental features of Ibn 'Arabî's thought and teaching in parallel forms clearly not dependent on the same language or cultural traditions.

socially, culturally and politically embedded, belief-based systems of ‘ethics’ necessary to the smooth functioning of any complex human collectivity.<sup>28</sup> Some of the most dramatic illustrations of that particular recurrent type of human conflict, for Ibn ‘Arabî and his original audiences, are of course to be found in the archetypal stories and spiritual biographies embedded in the hadith, *sîra*, and companion literatures, as well as the familiar tales of earlier prophets.<sup>29</sup>

This is a central area of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing and teaching in which the practical phenomenology of spiritual life is intimately connected to the most abstract theological and metaphysical considerations, especially those controversies that later arose in the centuries-long polemics surrounding the ‘Unicity of being’ and the necessarily paradoxical expressions of non-dualism. What Ibn ‘Arabî is trying to accomplish in those elaborate metaphysical and cosmological discussions (often centring on the divine ‘Names’ of the Qur’an), which are scattered throughout his *Futûhât*, is clearly directed above all to a very narrow, highly learned theological-philosophical audience. But we must keep on mind that it is precisely that learned audience of religious scholars who—in their frequent public role as politico-theological authorities and officially sanctioned ‘interpreters’ of the revelation—were (and still are) constantly called upon to ratify and legitimise all the destructive collective manifestations of those mass ‘suppositions’ of dualism, projection, reification and self-aggrandising idolatry whose actual worldly effects are never far from our view.

Against that exceedingly practical human backdrop, Ibn ‘Arabî’s characteristic elaborately developed distinctions of hierarchal or progressive ‘stages’, ‘dimensions’, ‘levels’—familiar features (always reflecting the subtleties of the Qur’an) both in his cosmology and metaphysics, and in his even more complex spiritual phenomenology—are far from mere arbitrary systematising; and they certainly have nothing to do with some inexplicable mania for classification. If we take them seriously, as his readers are certainly

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<sup>28</sup> See the chapter on ‘The Mysteries of *Ihsân*: Natural Contemplation and the Spiritual Virtues in the Qur’an’—and our related study of the dramatisation of this contrast of spiritual and belief-based ‘ethics’ in the Sura of Joseph (n. 8 above)—both included in our forthcoming volume *Openings: From the Qur’an to the Islamic Humanities*.

<sup>29</sup> His famous *Fusûs al-Hikam*, of course, is devoted in large part to the careful rhetorical ‘deconstruction’ and ‘re-revelation’ of the dramatically revealing situations and spiritual meanings conveyed by many of those canonical stories, whose originally intended spiritual implications are rapidly obscured, in every religious tradition, by the recurrent patina of familiarity and official respectability.

meant to do, we begin to discover that each of those hierarchical distinctions eventually corresponds—again within the living circle of individual spiritual realisation—to actual realities and experienced phenomena that tend to reveal themselves, not so surprisingly, once we actually take the trouble to look.<sup>30</sup> Equally important in this context of warring dualisms, reification, idolatry, and self-deluding *makar*, of course, are such familiar and better-studied rhetorical features of Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing as his reliance on paradox, irony (of endless sorts), terminological multiplicity and innovation, and the key etymological ‘deconstruction’ of key Arabic terms and Qur’anic symbols—all rhetorical efforts clearly intended, within the hermeneutical circle of realisation, to open the way to the truly revelatory re-construction of those textual divine ‘Signs’ (*âyat*, as Qur’anic verses) at last *as* genuinely theophanic Signs. Once one has begun to grasp the manifold intentions of those characteristic rhetorical devices, what emerges above all—especially in contrast with the far less ambitious devotional and pietistic literatures otherwise commonly associated with popular Sufism—is the extraordinary efforts this Shaykh goes to in order to unveil, for even his most recalcitrant learned readers, the inherently *dynamic* and open-ended nature of every soul’s innate process of spiritual discovery.

#### IV. ‘DANCING IN BOTH WORLDS’: SOME CONDITIONS FOR REALISATION

No doubt the easiest way to come to recognise the larger unifying political intentions scattered throughout the constantly shifting discussions and topics of the *Futûhât*, rather than starting with each of those particular passages in itself, is to begin instead with our own experience of those familiar responses, prospects and challenges that tend to arise whenever we are actively engaged in the processes of spiritual learning and discovery—i.e., in our own unique creative response to that perennial question raised by Ibn ‘Arabî with which we opened this study. If we keep those particular ‘unveilings’ clearly in mind, then we will immediately recognise—just as the Shaykh intended—the full relevance of each of the corresponding discussions and pertinent insights that come to our attention as we gradually move through these unique spiritual ‘Openings’.

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<sup>30</sup> Again, this constant interplay of ‘theoretical’ and phenomenological concerns within the actual operative dimensions of spiritual realisation is illustrated in detail throughout the passages from the *Futûhât* translated and discussed in *The Reflective Heart* (n. 4 above).

If we return, in this context, to our experience of that powerful ‘hadith of the Questioning’ introduced above, the first thing that my students typically discover—besides, or just after, their initial recall of those rare and usually unforgettable moments when we were either the agent or (as is perhaps more common) the unexpected recipient of one of those miraculously unexpected human manifestations of the divine Compassion (*rahma*)—is the paradoxical recognition of two powerful realities: (1) our extraordinary, often inexplicable ability to intuit the actual suffering and inner disturbance (if not its ‘form’ or outward occasion) of even the total strangers we may encounter; and (2) a host of paralysing, equally inexplicable fears and reticences (usually with an added layer of noisy intellectual obfuscation) that ordinarily keep us from actually acting upon and responding to our compelling awareness of those needs in others. The next and considerably more subtle stage of realisation, after extended experience and reflection on this situation, usually involves (3) the gradually dawning awareness of the real depth of pain and loss that we are actually experiencing (however deeply we may repress it) whenever we *fail to act* on our spiritual intuition—or whenever we see and experience others egregiously failing to respond that suffering in ourselves or others. And that awakening deeper realisation is usually followed rather quickly by (4) the further intimation that our own previous experiences of suffering and needfulness, in this perennial situation, do somehow mysteriously inform and help to account for the relative depth and acuity of our own individual capacity for actualised compassion. At that stage, perhaps, we are also ready to appreciate what Ibn ‘Arabî reports—in the departing words of Idrîs (chapter 15)—about the ‘Fire’ of life in this world as the purifying crucible of spiritual perfection (*kamâl*) eventually revealing the ‘gold and silver’ of each purified human spirit and its good-and-beautiful actions (*ihsân*).<sup>31</sup>

But how can we move beyond—or rather, through—this challenging situation? Without yet referring directly to Ibn ‘Arabî (since virtually everything he wrote can be construed as a part of his own practical reply to that question), there are certain basic practical responses, or at the very least preconditions for further discovery, that seem to arise in a natural, inevitable manner at this stage of realisation. And each of those responses, while it is certainly experienced as an inherently compelling spiritual obligation and responsibility, can also be expressed as a kind of essential freedom—necessary, in any case, if that

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<sup>31</sup> See the full translation of this key chapter from the *Futûhât* in our volume in preparation, *Elevations: Insight and Transformation in the ‘Meccan Illuminations’*, as well as the short excerpts included in Chapter 5 of *The Reflective Heart*.

responsibility is to be actualised in wider circles of realisation. From yet another perspective, each of these conditions is also a practical prerequisite for the effective exercise (and discovery) of the pre-eminent spiritual virtue of *ih̄s̄ân*: i.e., for recognising and accomplishing in each circumstance what truly is both good and beautiful. In the following list, no particular order or ranking is intended, since each of these elements seems equally essential; and indeed it is virtually impossible to separate them in the actual exercise of *ih̄s̄ân*. The necessarily brief references here to related themes in the *Futûhât* are more fully illustrated in our earlier preliminary studies of Ibn ‘Arabî’s approach to the problems of ‘law’ and spiritual authority.<sup>32</sup>

#### A. FREEDOM/OBLIGATION TO QUESTION AND LEARN: ENABLING ‘SPIRITUAL LITERACY’

Ibn ‘Arabî’s beautiful formulation of the all-encompassing dilemma of spiritual hermeneutics with which we began was, not surprisingly, itself an open *question*. For every step of real spiritual growth begins with a question: with an open-ended intention or aspiration whose ultimate aim, by its very nature, always remains ‘not yet’ known, and at best only vaguely intimated. And when we add to the initial natural spiritual testing situation of those ever-renewed divine Signs ‘in our own souls and in the world’ (from our epigraph above, Qur’an 41:53) the additional transforming catalyst of the revealed scriptural ‘Signs’ (*âyât*) and Prophetic indications, it is quickly apparent that the proper use and appreciation of those scriptural elements understandably requires a whole host of complex enabling conditions.

While we often tend to take the providential presence of many of those practical conditions for granted, not much reflection is required to begin to appreciate and outline the different essential elements of that mature ‘spiritual literacy’—far more demanding than linguistic literacy, and even more difficult to acquire—which we need to move successfully through the stages of spiritual realisation. We can better appreciate the remarkable historical challenges and creative achievements involved in satisfying these conditions simply by studying even briefly the mysterious processes by which the great spiritual works and

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<sup>32</sup> See especially the *Studia Islamica* article (‘Ibn ‘Arabî’s “Esotericism”: The Problem of Spiritual Authority’) cited in n. 19 above, as well as numerous related passages included in F. Rosenthal’s study cited at n. 24 above. Each of the points briefly mentioned in this section is the subject of a full chapter in our book on Ibn ‘Arabî’s political thought now in preparation. See also the related discussions and translations from the *Futûhât* summarised in E. Winkel, *Islam and the Living Law* (Karachi, Oxford U. Press, 1997).

institutions of the past came into being. But that same historical study constantly reminds us just as forcefully how every age and every individual is obliged to create anew the appropriate means for the newly-created spiritual challenges facing each generation. These are perennial obligations that Ibn ‘Arabî mentions and highlights for his readers in many different ways.

As he constantly points out throughout the *Futûhât*—and just as consistently, if sometimes less obviously, in all his other works—there is no human spiritual responsibility or obligation (*taklîf*) which is somehow free from the genuine exercise of our most distinctively human spiritual quality of free will. So even though life ‘outside the circle’ of realisation necessarily relies, in every human society, on its own specific forms of largely unconscious social consensus, agreement, and ‘belief’ (a common Arabic word which, quite tellingly, does not occur even a single time in the Qur’an), Ibn ‘Arabî’s writing can be seen, from this perspective, as one never-ceasing reminder that our movement into the circle and process of realisation, the gradual active assumption of our true human dignity (as *insân*, and not the conditioned-animal *bashar*) always begins with the discovery and exercise of our inalienable obligation to learn and discover the truly divine Self-revealing—and the corresponding transcendence of the dependencies of our ambient conditioning (*taqlîd*).

#### B. FREEDOM/OBLIGATION TO CREATE, INNOVATE, EXPERIMENT: EXPANDING DIVERSITY

One of the most ironically delightful surprises one encounters again and again in the *Futûhât*—given a familiar contrasting keynote of today’s prevalent Islamist political ideologies—is Ibn ‘Arabî’s frequent return to illustrate, in different contexts, the central practical spiritual importance of the famous hadith in which the Prophet lavishly praises the lasting, ever-multiplying spiritual rewards of ‘good-and-beautiful innovation’ (*bid‘a hasana*) in the spiritual path.<sup>33</sup> Underlying this fundamental spiritual necessity and obligation, of course are two even more fundamental themes in the Shaykh’s thought: his insistence (following many Qur’anic verses to that effect) on the providential, absolutely irreducible diversity of individual human natures and communities; and his characteristic emphasis, already elaborated above, on the inherently dynamic, ongoing nature of each human being’s spiritual development—and on the correspondingly inexhaustible divine Creativity underlying that spiritual responsibility.

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<sup>33</sup> See the full references and more extensive illustrations in our studies in notes 32 and 19 above.

Moreover, these points are not something he piously preaches simply in words, but ones that he dramatically illustrates, with literally hundreds of fascinating ‘case-studies’, in his telling accounts of both contemporary and earlier spiritual figures, including a good number with whose practical approaches and statements he quite openly disagrees—yet with whom in many cases he seems to have himself lived, worked and taught. For example, his well-known critical attitude toward the widespread practice of musical *samâ’* is only one illustration of this revealing co-existence of his own personal spiritual judgments together with his evident practical tolerance of opposing perspectives and interpretations.

Another recurrent expression of this same recognition of the spiritual necessity and inevitability of constant creativity—and the concomitant result of ever-expanding individual, social and cultural diversity—is his often forceful pronouncements, in various outwardly ‘legal’ contexts (and again closely reflecting repeated Qur’anic warnings to the same effect), radically questioning the ability or right of anyone to seek to impose the results of their own hermeneutical reasoning and spiritual discoveries on anyone else.<sup>34</sup> Equally revealing are his even more outspoken criticisms of many of the most basic assumptions and pretensions of the historical discipline of *fiqh*, when it is construed as the purported basis for some supposedly all-encompassing system of public religious ‘laws’.<sup>35</sup> One key implication of these consciously radical judgements, which he returns to even more frequently, is his sympathetic embrace of the open-ended, virtual infinite profusion of individual modes of ‘belief’.<sup>36</sup>

At an even deeper level, of course—as with his uniquely personal notions of the ‘individual archetypes’ (*a’yân thâbita*) of each person’s existence, and of each human soul’s ‘direct line’ to God (*al-wajh al-khâss*)—this awareness of truly absolute individuality and

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<sup>34</sup> See the detailed illustrations of these key principles, throughout the *Futûhât*, in our earlier studies cited at n. 19 above.

<sup>35</sup> See the translation (and explanatory notes) of chapter 366 of the *Futûhât* (‘The Mahdi and His Helpers’) in *The Meccan Revelations*, vol. I; Chapter 2 (‘Ibn ‘Arabî and the Tasks of Spiritual Insight and Creativity’) in *Orientalism: Islamic Thought in a World Civilisation*; ‘Ibn ‘Arabî’s Messianic Secret: From “The Mahdî” to the Imamate of Every Soul’, *JMIAS*, vol. XXX (2001), pp. 1-19; and the legal studies cited notes 32 and 19 above.

<sup>36</sup> *I’tiqâd*: a term that could be more adequately translated (especially in light of the Arabic etymological connotations of ‘restriction’ and ‘binding’ that Ibn ‘Arabî is always quick to highlight) as ‘the spiritually determinative conscious and unconscious assumptions and perspectives informing our uniquely individual “framing” of the nature of reality’. See especially the concluding passage from chapter 318 translated at the end of this essay.

diversity goes to the very heart of the Shaykh's distinctive conception of the divine Reality and Its infinite Self-manifestations. But here, as everywhere else, those famous metaphysical 'theories' have their roots and illustrations profoundly anchored in the spectrum of realities and probative experiences always accompanying the ongoing practical processes of spiritual realisation and discovery.

### C. FREEDOM/OBLIGATION TO 'MAKE BEAUTIFUL' (*ihsân*):

While Truth (*al-Haqq*), rather than Beauty (and the inseparable reality of love), is surely the overall keynote of Ibn 'Arabî's best-known writings—at least when they are compared with the classical poetic masterworks of the later Persian, Turkish, and other Eastern Islamic humanities—his books are also filled with practical acknowledgements of the essential role of these other indispensable elements of the spiritual Path. And in a number of places, such as his famous chapter 178 on Love in the *Futûhât*, he provides what is essentially the template for many centuries of later commentaries, which we find in all Islamicate languages, that are meant to bring out more openly and explicitly the originally scriptural elements and Prophetic lessons so effectively conveyed in the popularly accessible local forms of the Islamic humanities, from the *Burda* to the great mystical poems of Ibn al-Fârid—and their even more famous equivalents in other non-Arabic cultural and linguistic contexts.

We have separated this point out here as a distinctive pre-condition for the actual hermeneutical processes of spiritual realisation simply because the prevailing religio-political ideologies of our own time have so bizarrely pretended to divorce the obligation of *ihsân* (understood simply as 'doing good') from those equally essential components of divine Beauty and the motivating power of love from which the actual spiritual reality of *ihsân* can never be effectively separated. Hence we find ourselves all too often facing the strange dilemmas of a multitude of contemporary societies and cultures in which human beings, given their innate spiritual 'hunger' and 'thirst', naturally gravitate toward the realities of Beauty and the endless creative expressions of *ihsân* whenever they have the requisite freedom—yet where those principal divine realities are paradoxically assumed by religio-moralistic ideologues (of virtually every stripe) to be somehow excluded from those imagined impersonal, ideal systems of public 'morality' that they portray as being somehow imposed from without or above.

#### D. FREEDOM/OBLIGATION TO ASSOCIATE AND COMMUNICATE:

If each person's first conscious steps on the spiritual Path are necessarily 'individual' (or rather, happen to appear as such), certainly all the remaining advances are often taken in many indispensable kinds of 'spiritual company' (*suhba*), whose presences and indispensable influences are described and illustrated on virtually every page of Ibn 'Arabî's *Meccan Illuminations*. So whenever we are able to respond positively and appropriately to those uniquely individual spiritual challenges emblematically portrayed in the hadith of the Questioning, that actual movement toward realised compassion (*rahma*) and *ihsân* is almost inevitably with and through the influence, encouragement, and grace of spiritual companions and guides, present on many levels of being, whose roles and full influence become ever more visible and apparent as we advance. Once again, this is a basic phenomenological reality of all spiritual life whose scriptural, practical, and intellectual dimensions are taken up throughout Ibn 'Arabî's writings.

Moreover, some of the most remarkable and thought-provoking lessons of Ibn 'Arabî's works, emerging most clearly in scattered autobiographical remarks about himself and his Sufi companions and other spiritual contemporaries, have to do not with his actual teachings, but with the peculiarities of certain social and cultural conditions he evidently takes for granted—and which he specifically chose to highlight in his *Rûh al-Quds* (partly translated as '*Sufis of Andalusia*') and other autobiographical works. What is so striking in those personal accounts, almost everywhere that Ibn 'Arabî travels, is the presence everywhere of an extraordinary set of spiritually accomplished individuals (with or without visible charismatic powers, or *karamât*) who are themselves distinguished by their tell-tale signs of accomplished 'spiritual *ijtihâd*', or surprisingly creative endeavours of experimentation and realisation that are often radically different in both kind and expression from the formulaic institutional accounts and classical guidelines of proper *adab* available in near-contemporary and later Sufi manuals. As we can see throughout his writings, Ibn 'Arabî forcefully criticises those recently developed institutions and formulaic approaches on many occasions precisely for their routinisation (and presumptuous specialisation) of intrinsically universal spiritual tasks and responsibilities which he always insists are actually incumbent on all human beings (and certainly all Muslims), not just a handful of self-styled initiates.

On an even more visible, indeed inherently political level, when we consider those ever-present testing situations posed by the 'hadith of the Questioning', it is clearly close to impossible even to recognise the full extent of the sufferings and needs of those around us—

all the endless individual forms of inner ‘sickness’, ‘hunger’ and ‘thirst’ compressed in the succinctly forceful imagery of that hadith—whenever all individuals are not *free and empowered to communicate openly and effectively the actual realities of their state*. Hence any truly effective response to that fundamental human right and responsibility of genuinely free communication also necessarily requires a corresponding *freedom of association and collective action*, a right which is typically most directly efficacious (outwardly as well as spiritually) when it is local and closest to the particular needs and suffering that are in question.<sup>37</sup>

#### E. RESPECTING THE *AWLIYÁ'*:

No theme is more central to the *Meccan Illuminations* than that of *walâya* (of the divine Proximity and Guardianship), in all of its dimensions and manifestations. This includes by extension the vast subject of prophetology, and the wide-ranging practical spiritual functions in Ibn ‘Arabî’s world-view of that rare group of ‘Friends of God’ (the mysterious *qawm* described at 5:54) who are always at the centre of his concern: that specially missioned ‘people whom (God) *will* bring’ in these later times, ‘who love Him, and He loves them...’. So far, even the brilliantly summarised presentations and typologies of M. Chodkiewicz’ classic *Seal of the Saints* (or the traditional commentaries now available relating to this same issue as it arises throughout the *Fusûs*) do no more than scratch the surface of this immense and all-encompassing topic. This is perhaps the perfect illustration of a subject in Ibn ‘Arabî which appears initially as abstractly theological (and at least implicitly political) when viewed intellectually, from the ‘outside’ of our hermeneutical circle. But when we approach it from the more illuminating perspective of actual spiritual practice and realisation, in a very real sense virtually everything one encounters on the Path comes down to the probative manifestations and reassurances of the divine *walâya*.

For no one advances very far in the process of spiritual realisation—or discovers any lastingly satisfying answers to that fundamental hermeneutical question with which we opened this essay—without the tangible guiding presence of the ‘Friends of God’. And each step, after that initial discovery, is accompanied by the ever-growing awareness of their influences and guidance on every plane of our being—and of their presence, as so many of

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<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, Ibn ‘Arabî’s ongoing discussions of the spiritual themes of charity throughout the *Futûhât*, both as *zakât* and *sadaqa*, are among the most immediately accessible and spiritually powerful passages in that work.

these ‘Openings’ (and the hadith of the Questioning) constantly remind us, all around us, for ‘those with eyes to see...’.

In that light, the virtual absence of their mention—and indeed the not infrequent attitude of vehement denigration and even outright denial (extending even to the point of bombings and other sacrilege)—among the publicly prevailing pseudo-‘religious’ ideologies of our own day is one dramatic measure of the particular challenges facing the ‘people of realisation’ in this era. Even—or perhaps especially?—small children can immediately recognise the transforming presence of each human (and angelic) instrument of divine compassion that they encounter—an intuitive awareness, like that of holy and sacred places, which is built into the very essence of the heart. So few teachings of Ibn ‘Arabî could be more widely neglected, and yet more poignantly indispensable, in the distracted circumstances in which we find ourselves today.

#### F. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL NECESSITY OF CONSENSUS AND CO-OPERATION

What this particular heading points to is not those familiar types of spontaneous, small-group spiritual association already mentioned (at point D just above), which already develop directly and spontaneously from our natural response to those situations of suffering and need dramatised in the opening hadith of the Questioning. Instead, I am referring here to a far more visible, essentially political reality lying ‘outside’ the circle of specifically spiritual concerns, a creative political challenge which is daily re-enacted at levels stretching from the couple and family, at one extreme, to the most inclusive global moral communities. Ibn ‘Arabî was no unrealistic ‘utopian’ (in the ordinary sense of that term), but a keen observer of the visible surrounding political realities in a time of widespread turbulence and traumatic disorder so extreme that we can scarcely imagine it—caught as he was, throughout his life, between Crusades of both West and East, and the even more devastating Mongol invasions already underway to his East. As such, he devotes considerable attention throughout the *Futûhât* and elsewhere to dealing with the inevitably fraught and problematic relations between those rare individuals whose existence is conscientiously devoted to spiritual matters lying ‘within’ the circle of realisation, and the much larger portion of humanity who, on the level of conscious attention and intention, are ordinarily so deeply embedded in the manifold forms of unconscious *taqlîd* and reflexive natural behaviour that they may well imagine they are living solely in that ‘lowest life’ (*al-hayât al-dunyâ*) lying outside that circle.

In that light, another unfairly neglected subject scattered throughout the *Futûhât* is Ibn ‘Arabî’s careful attention to those basic matters of common worldly interest (*masâlih*) and

corresponding principles of practical wisdom and prudence (*hikam*, here in a more worldly sense) which necessarily underlie every lasting and successful form of public order—again, at every level of human association.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, since Ibn ‘Arabî often contrasts that shared domain of earthly practical wisdom with the dramatically more inclusive and far-reaching spiritual aims of the divine revelations (*sharâ’i’*), it is clear that some modern interpreters have occasionally misunderstood such contrasting passages as a kind of—typically ‘ascetic’, or dangerously ‘mystical’—denigration or even an outright denial of the ongoing importance of such worldly considerations and the complex forms of public consensus and compromise that are necessary for any stable socio-political order.

In fact, given the radical individuality and expanding creative diversity that Ibn ‘Arabî views as inevitably arising from the active pursuit of spiritual realisation, he repeatedly makes it clear—as is indeed evident in all his above-mentioned rhetorical forms of careful attention to the organising opinions and influences of that world ‘outside the circle’—that only a constant, widely shared public spirit of compromise, consensus, and appropriate concern with those central matters of public interest (*masâlih*) can make possible *in practice* each of these preceding essential supportive conditions for the tasks and obligations of spiritual realisation. In this respect, once again, Ibn ‘Arabî’s far-reaching political insights continue to highlight these essential perennial conditions for spiritual realisation and creativity in the ever-expanding, inherently diverse, multi-cultural and multi-confessional political and moral orders of the contemporary world—just as much as they did in the far more fragmented, scattered, localised, and highly unstable circumstances of the tumultuous centuries immediately following his death.

#### CONCLUSION

Thanks to an extraordinary amount of detailed historical and textual research over the past few decades, we can now follow in considerable detail during the centuries following Ibn ‘Arabî’s death, throughout the regions north and east of the original Arab conquests, many beautifully illustrative cases of those extraordinary local processes of spiritual and religious creativity—of *iẖsân* in the most profound and lasting sense—which gave rise to those locally adapted forms of the Islamic humanities that eventually made possible the

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<sup>38</sup> See the pioneering article of F. Rosenthal (n. 24) above for an especially helpful enumeration of the key passages in which Ibn ‘Arabî discusses these essential, humanly universal rational political principles, which also extend to the this-worldly aims of the divine revealed-pathways (*sharâ’i’*).

emergence of Islam as a truly world religious tradition.<sup>39</sup> (In our own time, incidentally, the same creative spiritual phenomena are still happening all around us, though of course more visibly for those who know where and how to look.) Against that inspiring backdrop, it is one of those curious historical ironies which one frequently encounters in the study of religion, that so many of the prevailing nationalist religious ideologies of our own day have chosen to portray those remarkably creative centuries of Muslim cultural creativity and diversity, and that hemisphere-wide theatre of incomparable spiritual effervescence and cultural expansion, as an age of so-called ‘decadence’, inactivity, and decay.

As the result of that recent detailed historical research, we can now find the traces of Ibn ‘Arabî’s influence throughout that period, both visible (textual) and implicit, almost wherever we turn. And that influence is equally palpable in *both* the integral facets of his writing discussed in this paper. Most obviously, it can be seen ‘outside’ the circle of realization, in the public, learned defence and theological articulation of his distinctive theses and understanding of the Islamic tradition, in ways which frequently dominated official religious circles, even in certain cases—as with Khumaynî’s famous ‘*Letter to Gorbachev*’—down to our own day. Less obviously demonstrable, but probably far more profound and lasting, was the actual spiritual interpretation and creative application of his intentions and insights by dedicated readers and students who actually put into practice, in the domains of realisation, all those lessons he sought to communicate to his spiritually prepared readers, those he addresses so tellingly at the end of his Introduction to the *Futûhât*,<sup>40</sup> who are able to

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<sup>39</sup> For an initial overview of the increasingly prolific and geographically wide-ranging spectrum of recent historical research illustrating the local impact of these phenomena in very different historical settings, see our web-based volume (incorporating several dozen articles, monographs and reviews of related publications), *Ibn ‘Arabî and His Interpreters: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Perspectives* (details at n. 3 above). Given the ever-expanding proliferation of publications in this area, probably the best way to follow this expanding research is provided by the bi-annual issues of the *Journal of the Muhyiddîn Ibn ‘Arabî Society* (Oxford). One of the best measures of the vast geographical and historical extent of the subsequent use and application of Ibn ‘Arabî’s teachings is in the highly detailed regional case-studies of the polemics and opposition to those influences, in a range of local settings, included in *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies & Polemics*, ed. Frederic de Jong & Bernd Radtke (Leiden, Brill, 1999). (See also the recent case-study cited in n. 40 below.)

<sup>40</sup> See the translation of those key sections of his *muqaddima* in ‘How to Study the *Futûhât*: Ibn ‘Arabî’s Own Advice’ (n. 24 above).

move from allusion to insight, and from insight to its realised expression and communication.<sup>41</sup>

That group of readers, who are not satisfied to ‘worship according to the prevailing suppositions’ of others, are indeed most likely to seek out and put into practice these and many other dimensions of Ibn ‘Arabî’s own response to the recurrent dilemmas of spiritual hermeneutics and realisation. Some of the key features of the Shaykh’s own deliberate response, carefully indicating how we may discover this mysterious, divinely intended ‘aspect of the Right/Truth/Obligation with God applying to *this* particular problematic situation’, are beautifully summarised in the following later key passage from the *Futûhât*:<sup>42</sup>

Now you must know that if the fully human being (*al-insân*) renounces his (own personal) aims, takes a loathing to his carnal self (*nafs*), and instead prefers his Lord: then the Real (*al-Haqq*) will give him a form of divine guidance in exchange for the form of his *nafs*, ...so that he walks in garments of Light. And (this form) *is* the revealed-pathway (*sharî‘a*) of his prophet and the message of his (prophetic) messenger. Thus he receives from his Lord what contains his happiness—and some people see (this divine guidance) in the form of their prophet, while some see it in the form of their (spiritual) state.

In the former case, Ibn ‘Arabî continues:

That (form) *is* the inner reality of that prophet and his spirit, or the form of an angel like him, who knows his revealed-Path from God... And we ourselves have often received in this way the form of many things among the divinely revealed judgments which we had not learned about from the learned or from their books. (For even) if the form (revealing that inspiration to the seeker) is

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<sup>41</sup> One recent, and historically particularly important, illustration of this kind of wide-ranging ‘unpublicised’ influence of the Shaykh’s thought within and through the arenas of actual spiritual realisation—and at the same time, of the carefully adapted cultural and political creativity highlighted in this essay above—can be found in Richard McGregor’s *Sanctity and Mysticism in Medieval Egypt: The Wafî Sufî Order and the Legacy of Ibn ‘Arabî* (Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 2004), as well as in the author’s other related studies in Egyptian Sufism (including his contribution to this 2005 Damascus colloquium).

<sup>42</sup> Chapter 318, vol. III, p. 70; the phrases in quotes in the preceding paragraph are taken from those longer key passages on the challenge of true spiritual hermeneutics, from chapter 64 of the *Futûhât*, introduced at the beginning of this essay.

not that of his prophet, then it still necessarily refers to his (particular spiritual) state or to the stage of the divine-revealing (*shar'*) with regard to that moment and that situation in which he saw that vision.

So nothing could be more universal, or more far-reaching in its practical implications and demands, than the Shaykh's summary conclusion here, his remarkable response to those recurrent dilemmas of interpretation with which we began—a response that immediately takes us back to each of those essential conditions for spiritual realisation discussed in the preceding sections:

... (For) apart from what is (unambiguously) forbidden or enjoined, there is no restriction on what he accepts from that (inspiration), whether with regard to beliefs or other things: for God's Presence encompasses the totality of all beliefs (*jamî' al-'aqâ'id*).

APPENDIX: The ‘Hadith of the Questioning’ (at the Resurrection)<sup>43</sup>

God says on the Day of the Rising: ‘O son of Adam, I was sick and you didn’t visit Me.’

He said: ‘O my Lord, how could I visit You, and You are Lord of the worlds?!’

God said: ‘Didn’t you know that My servant so-and-so was sick, yet you didn’t visit him?  
Or didn’t you know that if you had visited him you would have found Me with him?’

[Then God says:] ‘O son of Adam, did I not ask you for food, but you refused to feed Me?’

He said: ‘O my Lord, how could I feed You, and You are Lord of the Worlds!?’

God said: ‘Now didn’t you know that my servant so-and-so asked you for food, but you  
didn’t feed him? And didn’t you know that if you had fed him you would have found  
that with Me?’<sup>44</sup>

[Then God says:] ‘O son of Adam, I asked you for a drink, but you didn’t give Me anything  
to drink.’

He said: ‘O my Lord, how could I give You a drink, and You are Lord of the Worlds!?’

God said: ‘My servant so-and-so asked you for a drink, but you didn’t give him any. But if  
you had given him a drink you would have found that with Me.’

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<sup>43</sup> Translated here according to the version attributed to Abû Hurayra, recorded by Muslim, *birr*, 43, which is the source for the same hadith, included in its full longer context, in Ibn ‘Arabî’s own *Mishkât al-Anwâr* (number 98). See Graham, *Divine Word*, pp. 179-180.

<sup>44</sup> This twice-repeated phrase suggests an intentional reference to the dramatic eschatological context assumed in the frame-story of this hadith—in which the souls of those standing at the Judgement are themselves understood to be suffering terribly from the spiritual ‘hunger’ and ‘thirst’ often mentioned in those contexts in the Qur’an and other eschatological hadith.